

# Alphabetics: Phonemic Awareness & Phonics

## What is *phonemic awareness* (PA)?

- ◆ *Phonemic awareness* is the ability to distinguish and manipulate the individual *sounds*—phonemes—in spoken language. Although the English alphabet contains only 26 letters, the letters can be used to form 41 phonemes.
- ◆ Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to identify and manipulate the *larger* parts of spoken language, such as words, syllables, and rhymes.

## What is *phonics*?

- ◆ *Phonics* refers to the relationship between the *letters* of written language and the *sounds* of spoken language. It is different from phonemic awareness because it involves the letters themselves and how these relate to the sounds of the language.

## Why should PA and phonics be taught?

- ◆ Adult non-readers have virtually no phonemic awareness, and adult beginning readers have difficulty applying letter-sound knowledge to figure out new words while reading (Kruidenier, 2002).
- ◆ Research has shown PA and knowledge of letters to be the two best indicators of how well children will read by the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade (NRP, 2000).
- ◆ Research has found that instruction in phonics leads to improved word-reading and, to a lesser degree, improved reading comprehension for adults, for at-risk kindergartners and first-graders at all SES levels, and for disabled readers in Grades 2-6 (Kruidenier, 2002; NRP, 2000). The NRP (2000) found that the effect of phonics instruction on text comprehension for the older readers was significantly less than that for younger readers, indicating that other factors (fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies) may need to be assessed and taught as well.
- ◆ Research has found that abilities in PA and phonics in adults and children do improve with instruction (Kruidenier, 2002; NRP, 2000).

### Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: ADULTS (Kruidenier, 2002)

- ◆ Assess beginning readers' phonemic awareness, phonics abilities, and sight word knowledge. Since adult beginning readers are generally better at recognizing familiar sight words than children who are learning to read, avoid using sight words adults may know for phonics assessments.
- ◆ Provide adult beginning readers with a significant amount of alphabets instruction, in conjunction with other aspects of reading.
- ◆ Continue to assess PA in beginning readers, even if their overall reading scores are going up. Research suggests that adults with a learning disability in reading may not develop phonemic awareness as they learn to read; thus, attending to PA development may help teachers identify those students who need more in-depth work with PA or who need instruction that bypasses PA.

### Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: CHILDREN (NRP, 2000)

- ◆ Explicitly and systematically teach children to manipulate phonemes with letters.
- ◆ Focus instruction on 1-2 types of phoneme manipulation, instead of on multiple types. Segmenting and blending seem to be the most important manipulations to teach.
- ◆ Teach phonemic awareness in small groups. (Research shows no difference in the effectiveness of phonics instruction provided to individuals, small groups, or whole classes.)
- ◆ Monitor PA learning carefully. Students who do not respond to PA instruction may have a reading disability.
- ◆ Use some form of systematic phonics instruction. Teach a carefully selected and useful set of letter-sound relationships, organized into a logical instructional sequence. (It does not seem to matter whether or not the approach asks readers to turn letters into sounds, use analogies, or notice spelling patterns.)
- ◆ Encourage readers to apply their phonics knowledge while reading connected text and writing.
- ◆ Provide instruction in the other essential elements (phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, text comprehension).
- ◆ Begin phonics instruction in kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup> grade and continue for about 2 years.
- ◆ Consider motivational issues.

#### Sources

Kruidenier, John (2002). *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, Partnership for Reading.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: an Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction (Report of the Subgroups)*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.